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Globalisation from a Buddhist Perspective

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A Buddhist Perception of Globalisation



he current debate on globalisation has a broad area of general agreement, namely, that globalisation is the latest expression of a long-standing strategy of development based on economic growth and the liberalisation of trade and finance. This results in the progressive integration of the economies of nations across the world through the unrestricted flow of global trade and investment. Beyond these points, people participating in the debate generally split into two main camps: those who believe that the expansion of the free market economy will benefit the societies and those who do not.

The mainstream approach is generally the former, rooted in the underlying assumption that globalisation brings jobs, technology, income and wealth to societies. However, these societies must be willing to submit to the principles of the free market—limiting public spending, privatising public services, removing barriers to foreign investment, strengthening export production, and controlling inflation. Those against the above policies argue that the 'great success story'

of globalised production has led to a litany of social and ecological crises: poverty and powerlessness of the majority of people, destruction of community, depletion of natural resources, and unendurable pollution. [1]

However, from a Buddhist perspective and from our experience in Thailand, the authors of this article have to say that our standpoint is closer to the latter, with the awareness that there is big diversity within both camps and that there are people who are trying to work out something in between the two.

We must remember that when we talk about globalisation there are other aspects, like globalisation of the dominating consumer monoculture and accompanying devastating environmental effects. On a more positive note, all around the world we can witness evidence of the rising consciousness of the inter-connection of ecological systems and the emergence of global networking among those in civil society. However, from a Buddhist perspective, the very core of the globalisation process is the globalisation of *taṇhā* or 'craving'. According to Buddhist analysis, craving is the root cause of all suffering.

As mentioned above, the term globalisation may be new, but the causes and conditions leading to it are

not. Globalisation is an expansion and continuation of the idea of development, which is rooted in the belief that the 'progress' of humanity is a linear, anthropocentric process.

When we look at *tanḥā* in relation to this kind of world view we can see that it has created a civilisation that victimises its own people, as well as people of other world views and other sentient beings. Over the last few hundred years, this has been happening in the name of industrialisation, colonialisation and development in both capitalist and communist frameworks.

As craving becomes globalised, the scale of suffering has been vastly amplified around the world. Masses of largely self-sufficient Third World communities are being rapidly transformed into consumers of capital-intensive goods and services, mainly those provided by the trans-national corporations. While a small number of people perceive a benefit through an increased standard of living, the majority fall victim to discontent, dependency and poverty. With the increased emphasis on material goods, the quality of life of both groups deteriorates and becomes spiritually void.

From the Buddhist perspective, both the anthropocentric elements and the belief in progress

are basic wrong views. In Buddhism the concept of inter-relatedness is essential. If we seriously consider this, human beings cannot be the 'centre of the universe'. We are just one among many species and our well-being depends on the well-being of other species and the natural environment.

The belief in progress is a wrong view because it moves us away from the 'present moment'. The causes and conditions of staying in the 'present moment' or the 'moment of reality' are, for Buddhism, of prime importance in the art of coping with suffering. Under the 'progress' ethos we are led to expect that things will be better in the future at the cost of the present reality. This belief in progress is a kind of myth as it promises something that will never be completely fulfilled—indeed the striving to fulfil this myth is an aspect of the *taṇhā*.

For the sake of modernisation, ordinary people have been induced to abandon cultures and ways of life that have evolved over thousands of years and are for the most part extremely appropriate to local conditions and environment. Workers have been forced to sacrifice their labour for low wages for the sake of industrialisation; farmers have been relocated for big infrastructure projects in the name of development and economic growth. In these processes, the disruption to living in the 'present

moment' and the resulting upheaval is given little or no consideration at all.

As *tanhā* increases around the world, it goes hand in hand with the creation of an almost total consumer monoculture. This monoculture is evangelised through the global advertising agencies, the information highway, satellite and cable television, and Western film studios. These huge 'dream factories' and 'information creators' are coming from an alien cultural base with little relevance to the diverse localities to which they are beaming their acquisitive gospel. Their alluring messages convey an almost totally inappropriate and non-sustainable lifestyle to the most remote corners of the world. The vast majority of people who are manipulated by these messages will never have the means to fully acquire the images portrayed to them so they will feel inferior and culturally backward.

Like the extinct species of the Amazon, thousands of years of unique cultures are being lost around the world in the name of globalisation and progress. As world culture becomes homogenised, traditional art and music forms become undervalued and obsolete. All over the world there is a common oral tradition of storytelling with vibrant singers and dancers portraying unique tales of seasons, gods and local events. These largely spontaneous artists, whose art

stimulates compassion, community and solidarity, are the heart and soul of local communities. They are now being ousted by the new icons of pop culture like Michael Jackson whose performances to the masses hardly enhance their quality of life.

As the trans-nationals invade every society, they bring with them overpowering media that drown out the gentler, more vibrant local cultural norms. Hence personal success in terms of wealth, power, recognition and futile attempts to fulfil unsatiable sensual pleasure, become the domineering values in globalised society. The result is an inappropriate form of 'Western' culture, hungry for the unnecessary, overpackaged, standardised products of the trans-national organisations. People are taught to compete and compare in the purchase of excessive consumer goods. In short, greed, violence and delusion—which the Buddhists call *akusalamūla* (unwholesome roots)—in different forms are the norm promoted in the globalised culture.

However, it seems that the negative result of karma is coming back to hit its own sources, as we see unemployment, devastation of the environment and disintegration of family and community values in all societies following this destructive direction. This is provoking more and more deep criticism and challenges both from within those societies and from

people of other civilisations. Some critics even put it dramatically that:

“We are witnessing the end of modernity. What this means is that we are in the process of changes in Patriarchy (I am male); Individualism (I win therefore I am); Materialism (I shop therefore I am); Scientific Dogmatism (I experiment therefore I know better, or I have no values thus I am right); and Nationalism (I hate the other therefore I am). This is however a long-term process and part of the undoing of capitalism. All these connect to create a new world, which is potentially the grandest shift in human history. We are in the midst of galloping time, plastic time, in which the system is unstable and thus can dramatically transform.” [2]

Unfortunately, firstly our elites and later our ordinary people seem to have lost confidence in our own cultural values. We become convinced that our civilisations are inferior, although we may still pay lip service to the forms of our traditions. People in this state of mind are easily lured onto the consumer bandwagon in its many forms.

This is especially true of the younger generation who are so much influenced by the media of the

multinationals. Today our young people aspire to go to expensive Western schools. An inappropriate Western-style of architecture is spawning all over the world. We are abandoning appropriate and traditional costumes in favour of Western-style clothes. In many cases, influenced by the hamburger, pizza and Coca Cola type chains, people around the world are even changing their eating and drinking habits in order to emulate the 'progressive' nations.

Sustainable and wise cultural practices are also changing. The Chinese are no longer proud that they abandoned the 'firegun' hundreds of years ago though they had the knowledge to invent it before any Western nations if they chose to. The high-ranking Buddhist monks are forgetting the basic teachings of the Buddha to live a simple life in quest of higher wisdom—these modern monks are competing with each other for the latest model BMW and Mercedes! Lay Buddhists often use Buddhism only as a ritualistic function in life and few live according to the real teachings. Today most lay Buddhists actually worship money and 'success'.

Around the world, the numbers of single people are rising and the isolated 'nuclear family' is becoming the norm. Modern people are becoming more and more cut off from communities, societies and the natural environment. Surely this cannot sustain itself, and

over the next generation we will witness further breakdown of societies. Ultimately this may mean the end of the era of modernity, though it is still uncertain what world view will emerge from the ruins.

Problems Caused by Globalisation

Thus it would seem that globalisation can mean the spreading of greed, violence and individualism to all corners of the globe. From a Buddhist point of view, when the cultural values of a society are motivated by these unwholesome roots, the society itself will face all kinds of difficulties. These include corruption, crime, war, exploitation and abuse. Generally they lead to ecological destruction, disintegration of cultural values and the breakdown of all relationships.

This is because, from a non-self point of view, we are one with other beings in the universe, human and non-human. Hence to harm others is to harm ourselves as well. Our social and environmental crises prove this law of nature. The inter-relatedness between human moral conduct and ecological balance is clearly stated in the ancient scriptures, as seen in a paper of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu's translations and comments on a Pāli sutta. [3] The sutta describes the outcome of people not acting in accordance with the Dhamma (law of nature):

“Now, when the brahmins and people with money already do not act according to Dhamma, the city people and country people do not act in accordance with Dhamma, so it follows that both the city and the country people do not act according to Dhamma. When we have reached the point where all people do not act according to Dhamma there arise uncertainties, fluctuations, and abnormal conditions in all of nature: The orbit of the moon and sun is fluctuating and uncertain... the stellar system has been disturbed by the ambitions of very greedy people, people who do not act according to Dhamma.”

The sutta goes on to describe how the pattern or order of the universe becomes confused and this affects the patterns of weather, which affect the crops and in turn the people and animals cannot survive. Buddhadāsa comments:

“Human beings have long since brought about injustices which have left their mark on nature: this has resulted in nature behaving incorrectly. When nature is disrupted, it surrounds humans and brings about their continued downfall until it affects their physical bodies and their heart-mind: then our heart-mind also becomes mixed

up.”

We can see these difficulties clearly happening in all societies as they become touched by modernisation. Under the new name of globalisation the catastrophe will further intensify. The mad rush towards progress in the last thirty years of development in Siam has left a vast disparity between rich and poor, and huge, devastating scars on the culture, the natural environment and social norms. It is hard to believe that contemporary Thai values have sprung from a Buddhist culture.

Many aspects of contemporary Siam are frightening examples of all that is wrong with modernisation. The underpinning capitalist monoculture promotes a value system almost totally at odds with the traditional Buddhist philosophy based on inter-connection, compassion, and awareness of greed, hate, and delusion.

Let us start with Bangkok, once renowned as the Venice of the East, a mystic city of canals and golden spires—now one of the most polluted cities in the world, a concrete jungle in the truest sense. Known to locals as *Krung Thep*, the City of Angels, Bangkok is full of construction sites, ugly new buildings, super-highways, and shopping malls indiscriminately built which tear the heart out of local communities. Many

huge slum areas have materialised and many people live in shacks which, in the rat-ridden, exhaust-fumed city, are not an abode for healthy living.

For many of the city's visitors Bangkok's angels are the numerous prostitutes in what has now become a global centre for sex tourism. The prostitutes are mainly young girls from poor rural areas and indigenous hill tribes both from within Siam and from neighbouring countries. Many of these unsophisticated girls have been tricked or lured into becoming prostitutes by unscrupulous procurers who recruit from the villages, promising high salaries for jobs in the 'entertainment' industry. Most of the girls had little awareness of exactly what this would entail. This burgeoning of the sex industry has been encouraged by an emerging consumer society advocating instant gratification. It was spurred on by the US soldiers on 'R & R' from the war in Vietnam and later by the sex tourists who were lured to fill the gap.

The landscape of Siam has been stripped of its trees, the coral reefs destroyed through pollution and plundering. The water in the numerous canals and rivers of this water-based culture are now so polluted they are unsafe to swim in. The destruction of the rain forests, which act as natural sponges during the rainy season, has caused extreme flooding. The building of

huge dams for hydro-electricity caused thousands of people to lose their traditional, self-reliant way of life when they were displaced by these dams to infertile land and lured by government schemes to produce cash crops. Only a few decades ago the culture was still based on rural sustainable agriculture that was interdependent with the floods; the farming seasons worked around it, welcoming the fertile silt from the flood-water. If a few simple, thatched houses were damaged they were easily replaced or repaired from the abundant forests. Nowadays floods are seen as a menace destroying unsustainable cash crops and causing unbelievable chaos to the already congested streets of Bangkok. In these days of acquisition the fear of floods has a whole new dimension as expensive houses and possessions are in danger of water damage.

How could this happen in a Buddhist society? With few exceptions the monks of Siam naively welcome globalisation as an unavoidable friend. Many monks have consumer goods such as mobile phones, BMWs and portable computers; many are obsessed with raising money from their newly rich parishioners to build ever bigger Buddha statues and useless halls and buildings.

As is the trend around the world, the bright young contemporary minds of Siam are being lured into the

fast-paced business world with little time or inclination to develop wisdom through contemplation. Young and old Thais alike are victims of the huge promotion of a global monoculture through the actions of the multinationals with the capitalist, individualistic ethos.

Activists, environmentalists, and ordinary people affected by big development projects launched campaign after campaign against these tendencies such as the Forum of the Poor protests. The effect of this was that Thai and foreign multinational corporations turned to neighbouring countries for timber, hydro-electric dams and other natural resources.

This kind of development truly benefits very few people and even those who become rich often become victims of acquisitive desires which rob them of personal fulfilment. In spite of their 'success' in wealth, power and recognition, they are still haunted by the sense of lack and basic existential insecurity: a basic fact of life which they never have time to attend to. These people, eager for instant gratification, have lost touch with the art of coping with basic human suffering. This art has been well developed in the Buddhist tradition through meditation practice and is a wonderful tool for ensuring emotionally mature and stable adults. Indeed it is an integral part of most

traditional religions and indigenous wisdom.

This new kind of suffering, spawned by consumerism and fuelled by the globalisation process, is happening in various stages all over Southeast Asia, and indeed the world. Even in countries like Burma and Laos the scars of the consumer society are emerging. This is seen in the ugly modern buildings that are starting to appear in Rangoon and Vientiane, in the ubiquitous Coca Cola available in the smallest villages, and in the gentle people who feel 'left behind' and aspire to Western goods they have seen on television.

Looking at these trends globally, we see startling evidence of structural violence in regard to economic injustice in the world today. For instance, 20% of people in the richest countries receive 87% of the world income, while the poorest 20% of the world's people receive barely 1.4% of total income. The combined incomes of the top 20% are nearly 60 times larger than those of the bottom 20%. The gap doubled since 1950 when the top 20% had 30 times the income of the bottom 20%. And this gap continues to grow.

"The thin segment of super-rich in the world have formed a stateless alliance that defines global interest as synonymous with the personal and corporate financial interest of its

members. They claim the world's wealth at the expense of less affluent people, other species, and eco-systems on the planet. This is the true meaning of global competitiveness—competition among localities. Large corporations, by contrast, minimise their competition through mergers and strategic alliances.” [4]

The result of this structural violence is that for 80% of the world's population, globalisation means global poverty in the sense that:

“In the 1960's and before, capitalism needed us, if only to exploit us. They not only needed our land, our natural resources, our forests, our ports, they needed us as workers, to exploit our labour. Now they do not even need us to exploit. We are expendable. So they decided to let us die. To let us have diseases such as cholera, to let us have our shanty-towns around all the major cities, where millions of people live. 'They' are creating another type of society, also capitalist, or rather sub-capitalist. It is the Capitalism of Poverty.” [5]

As part of being human, we all have a tendency towards greed, hatred, and delusion. In the modern

world this tendency is greatly encouraged, hence the globalisation of suffering described above. In a more just and fair society these negative trends are warned against rather than worshipped as something we all should pursue.

An Alternative Buddhist Vision

How can Buddhism contribute meaningfully to the present crisis of civilisations? We suggest that the main contribution will be the Buddhist view of the meaning of life and its implications for the kind of society that encourages this. From the Buddhist point of view, happiness doesn't come from trying to satisfy *taṇhā* (unsatiable cravings), either for material wealth, power, recognition or sensual pleasure—a trend propagated by the present global consumerism. On the contrary, glorifying *taṇhā* will lead to meaninglessness, dissatisfaction and alienation. Happiness and real meaning of life come from the reduction of *taṇhā*, which will in turn open space for the wholesome qualities of life to flourish, e.g. compassion, wisdom, generosity, peace of mind. These wholesome qualities will connect us to ourselves, our fellow human beings and nature. These qualities of life are considered *ariyadhana* (noble wealth), real qualities that will help us to cope with

suffering. Buddhism encourages us to confront this existential suffering in life. Supposedly, modern culture offers a way to escape from this suffering in the name of progress with its promises of health, prosperity and consumption. In other words, modern culture encourages the satisfying of *tanḥā*, which is the root cause of suffering. So this is why there is so much suffering in the modern world despite the high levels of prosperity and technological advance.

In an authentic Buddhist civilisation, a good life would be materially simple and in tune with the natural environment. One would have few belongings and abundant time for meditation, friendship and community life. A good Buddhist society is one that is dominated by values such as cooperation, generosity, compassion, spirituality and a social environment that supports and encourages the growth of wholesome qualities among people. In the ideal Buddhist society the economic, political and cultural structures would support the growth of these virtues. Of course this is the opposite of the present global trends. From this viewpoint, a simple life is preferable, one with far fewer consumer goods than in the present Western norm. This is because less consumption will ease our material burden and allow us to cultivate wholesome qualities.

This doesn't mean that Buddhism rejects material

well-being. The point is to know and understand the limits of material well-being, but not to let the 'means' become the 'end' as modern people tend to do. A mantra for this kind of living could be 'contentment' rather than 'the more the better.' This should not be construed as a rigid ideology but should allow a wide range of modes of ownership with upper limits. At one end of the scale would be people living very simply with basic 'material' security such as authentic Buddhist monks and nuns, who consume according to their basic needs but devote their lives to the service of humankind and all sentient beings. Such people can be the guiding lights of a society. At the other end are people who care only for the well-being of an individual and their immediate family. They may do so but with an upper limit on ownership that does not allow them to use wealth to exploit others and nature. Greed is not encouraged. Between these two poles there can be a diverse range of modes of ownership and enterprise according to individual choice based on the ideas of economic decentralisation.

Another pertinent factor is political decentralisation. This is because power, like wealth, can be used both negatively and positively, and the tendency to use it negatively is always there. So for political organisations, the smaller the better. We have to bear in mind that the Buddha established the Sangha in a

very decentralised form, without appointing any of his disciples to be the supreme leader even though there were many enlightened disciples in those days.

As Buddhists, we would draw inspiration from the Buddhist tradition to encourage localisation and decentralisation over globalisation and monopolisation. This kind of localisation and decentralisation doesn't conflict with international networking among civil society initiatives as long as it is not in the spirit of centralisation.

While there are undoubtedly many factors, in principle we agree with David Korten's argument that:

“We do not have a globalised economy because of some historical inevitability. We have it because a small group of people who had enormous political and economic power chose to advance their narrow and short-term economic interest through a concerted well-organised and well-funded effort to rewrite the rules of the market to make it happen. In other words, economic globalisation came about as a consequence of conscious human choices. It is the right, indeed the responsibility, of those who were not party to those decisions to reclaim the power we have yielded to those who have used it against the public interest and to make different choices.” [\[6\]](#)

Globalisation and Non-Self

Globalisation, like anything else, is impermanent and thus 'non-self' and will last as long as causes and conditions allow it. Like all other tempting matters, we need to be aware of both the positive and negative effects of globalisation. Once we have enough critical awareness that the negative aspect outweighs the positive aspect, we will be able to liberate ourselves from it. At least in Siam, the poor are the ones who have seen the negative side very clearly.

As Buddhists, we believe that no institution can last long without real moral legitimacy, however powerful it may be. In regard to the multinational corporations manipulating the globalisation process mainly for their own benefit and creating so much suffering for other people, we agree with people who foresee the end of the present trends towards globalisation.

“The future of the planet cannot be and will not be the simple continuation of the present neoconservative capitalism. That economic system will never deliver the good of development and welfarism to all of us. The frustration and anger of the jobless and of the hungry (and unfulfilled?) will be increasingly corroborated by the loss of confidence by a growing part of humankind in the progress and

happiness promised by capitalism and its 'development'. Immanuel Wallerstein believes that capitalism may collapse, not primarily because it is lacking economic technology to adjust to the crises but due to the fundamental lack of legitimacy in the eyes of both the North and the South." [7]

A Buddhist response is not just sitting and waiting for Māra (evil forces) to cause collapse. We have to cultivate our *pāramī* (spiritual strengths) to liberate ourselves and our communities from this corporate-imperialist process.

In Siam there are a number of grassroots initiatives led by far-sighted farmers and NGO workers that are attempting to liberate their communities from the mainstream market forces. Their primary approach is to return from cash-crop agriculture, promoted by the government in the last thirty years, to growing food for community consumption with only the surplus sold for cash.

Over the last ten years or so some farmers and villages have been experimenting with alternative agricultural projects emphasising organic fertiliser and insecticide, on a subsistence economy base.

After a decade, the improved quality of life can be

clearly seen and has become a visible demonstration of a viable alternative. However, the general picture for rural Siam over the last decade is much more depressing. Many, many farmers have gone into debt and bankruptcy by joining the cash-crop economy. Thousands of rural people have been relocated from their fertile homelands due to big development projects such as hydro-electric dams and power stations. These are major reasons for the long protests of the Forum of the Poor over the last ten years. With the protests of the poor and the severe problems of the growth-oriented economy, Siam is close to a crisis situation. Many people are starting to look to the few innovative examples of alternative agriculture as a solution, especially among the poor. Prompted by the demands of the Forum, some government departments are planning to cooperate with the NGOs and peoples' organisations to encourage around eight million farmers to join this movement. This is an exciting new direction although it is still too early to predict any real positive change.

As for the middle and upper classes, the falling of the Thai economy may help to awaken people to the real nature of globalisation. During the last fifteen 'boom' years as their businesses flourished, many Siamese worshipped globalisation and development. Now as the bottom starts to fall out of the economy

they are left wondering how they can survive. Many may not yet see that there is now an opportunity for people to develop a true critical awareness of the dangers of globalisation. Hopefully the voice of mindfulness from Buddhist thinkers such as the late Venerable Buddhādāsa and Sulak Sivaraksa will be listened to more than those of the secular technocrats and money-makers who have been determining the fate of the country for the last half-century.

Notes

1. See Power, G. (1997), “Globalisation and its Discontents,” in *Development: The Journal of the Society for International Development*, Vol. 40, No. 2, June 1997, Rome, Italy, pp.76–77. [\[Back\]](#)
2. Inayatullah, S. (1997). “Global Transformation,” in *Development: The Journal of the Society for International Development*, Vol. 40, No. 2, June 1997, Rome, Italy, p. 33. [\[Back\]](#)
3. Buddhādāsa, translated by Olsen, G. (1987). “A Notion of Buddhist Ecology,” in *Seeds of Peace*, Vol. 3, No. 2, May 2530, Bangkok, Siam, pp.22–27. [\[Back\]](#)
4. Korten, D. (1996). “The Failure of Bretton Woods,” in *The Case against the Global Economy*, edited by Mander, J. & Goldsmith, E., Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, p. 24. [\[Back\]](#)
5. Hoidobro, E. (1996), quoted on p. 57 in Carmen, R. (1997), “How Much is Enough,” in *Development: The Journal of the Society for International Development*, Vol. 40, No. 2, June 1997, Rome, Italy. [\[Back\]](#)
6. Korton, op.cit., pp. 65–66. [\[Back\]](#)

7. Verhelst (1966), quoted in Carmen, op. cit., p. 57
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